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20 Science institute celebrates birthday with 'violence' and cake

by Erling Friis-Baastad

The Yukon Science Institute lecture series is always popular, but Sunday evening's presentation at the Westmark Whitehorse was extra special.

For the occasion, Dr. Gordon Rostoker of the University of Alberta returned to the territory to present the talk *Northern Lights: Violence in the Sky*. Rostoker was the very first YSI speaker 18 years ago, so it is fitting that he helped celebrate the 20th anniversary of the incorporation of this active, growing, essential institution.

Since its inception, the Yukon Science Institute has held over 200 lectures on a wide variety of topics, including many on Beringia. (painting by George Teichmann, courtesy Yukon Beringia Interpretive Centre)

Before Rostoker spoke Sunday, awards were presented. The first went to Steve Robertson, owner of the Yukon News, for the newspaper's years of support through ads and coverage of the YSI.

The second went to Tim Koepke, an engineer and surveyor, and an ever-active founding member of the institute.

Last week, Koepke talked to *yourYukon* about the history of YSI.

"Dr. Art Pearson has to be given credit for having the idea for the institute; it was Art who turned the light on for the rest of us," said Koepke.

As he recalled, Pearson, now a former Canadian Wildlife Service biologist, Yukon Commissioner and businessman, had urged that he and his like-minded friends get together on a project "to promote a better understanding of science in the territory."

The society was incorporated in April 1985.

"I think Art and I anted in 100 bucks each and opened a bank account and then wondered, 'What are we going to do next?'" said Koepke.

"In our early years, we brainstormed about trying to create a scientific research centre. We held discussions with Industry Canada, with the National Research Council..."

"In those days the department of Indian and Northern Affairs was talking very seriously about building a water-testing lab here and we thought, 'Hmmm, maybe that would be a home for us or a pivot for us, if we were able to round up enough capital to build a facility and use it for visiting scientists.'"

However, one major priority emerged: "increasing the basic level of understanding of scientific matters by Yukoners."

Those who were in the school system were generally covered, but not adult members of the public at large, said Koepke.

"We all thought, 'Gee, if we could start holding some public lectures on what's happening in the scientific community...'"

"In those days, as it is today, the Yukon was a research lab for every university in the country, and some in the United States and even out of North America as well."

"What was happening was, so many researchers were coming here, doing their work, and going home and we wouldn't even know they'd come and gone until a publication would show up two or three years later in a technical journal or science magazine."

"One of our concerns was, 'How can we delay these people a few days, on the way in or on the way out, and get them to leave behind some of the knowledge that they've gleaned during their research here?'"

The very first lecture, which was also held in the Westmark Whitehorse -- then called the Sheffield -- has become the source of one of the society's guiding legends.

Koepke recalled bringing Rostoker home before the February 1987 lecture and everyone sitting around speculating on that night's attendance.

Because YSI then had five directors, there would be at least five in the audience, they decided. More in hope than in certainty, they had set up 30 chairs for the lecture.

As it turned out, those directors and hotel staff had to scurry to keep up with the demand for chairs, as the audience swelled to a couple hundred.

Since then, YSI has tried to maintain a schedule of between eight and 14 speakers a year.

Right at the start, YSI directors decided that the lectures would be free, and they have remained that way, though audience members are encouraged to join the society, not so much because the institute craves each five-dollar membership fee, but because there is strength in numbers.

"We try to zero in on topics that have relevance to Yukoners," said Koepke. "What we try to do is relate science to everyday challenges Yukoners are facing."

Alternative energy is high on the list. "Don't think the price of motor fuel and heating fuel isn't going to result in ever-greater interest in alternatives to fossil fuels," he

said.

YSI has also hosted many presentations of facets of Beringia. Ice age mammals are always popular with Yukoners -- many of whose paths have, at one time or another, crossed those once trod by giant mammoths and steppe bison.

"Our major funding source is the Yukon government's Heritage branch, and it has a significant investment in Beringia, with the Beringia Centre and research in general, and our funding agreement with them is that we will have a continuing focus on Beringia-related topics," said Koepke.

YSI has probably hosted more than 200 lectures by now, said Koepke.

Of them, three topics stand out in his mind as "real barn burners." These were: the northern lights, dinosaurs and traditional healing.

The institute has undertaken many other initiatives over the years, though Yukoners are most familiar with its support of annual science fairs.

"We were able to get our own involvement up to the point where we actually hosted the 1995 Canada-wide science fair, which brought 600 young scientists, chaperones, judges, whatever, to the Takhini Arena for about a week," said Koepke.

YSI doesn't go the course alone, he stressed.

The science fair initiatives are a case in point. Innovators in the Schools through Yukon College and the Northern Research Institute have been involved in hosting the fairs.

The Energy Solutions Centre and the Commissioner have donated awards.

Over time, the YSI has had several addresses, a variety of hosts and supporters, and has taken on several contracts, but it is becoming ever-more clear to all involved what the priorities are.

"Do we need a facility? Do we need a building? We revisited that a number of times and decided that what we are doing now is what we do best," said Koepke.

"We had a strategic planning session here in the spring and our directors held a kind of secret ballot on the priorities." Overwhelmingly, they placed the lecture series and the science fairs at the top of the list.

The YSI is a sort of "Mickey Mouse operation," said Koepke with a chuckle.

"It isn't located anywhere. It is a telephone number and a fax number. For all intents and purposes the registered office is my residence and all the day-to-day business is done by the current contract co-ordinator Lori Schroeder, wherever she does it from."

Meanwhile, YSI is busy arranging this season's lecture series. Global warming is a hot topic now, so it's likely some speakers will address climate change.

"And this year we're thinking of getting somebody up who is a tsunami expert," said Koepke.

Occasionally the board learns of a scientist who is coming through the territory, and is willing to speak here, only a month or so ahead of time, so it's a good idea to keep an eye on the institute's web site.

For more information on the YSI and its lecture series go to www.taiga.net/ysi.